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ABSTRACT

Past historical studies have resulted in contradictory interpretations of the social-philosophical motives underlying the early rationale of the vocational education movement. Contemporary vocational educators argue that early tenets (and the underlying philosophy of providing more equal opportunity and freedom of occupational choice) have not been transmitted to the present-day interpretation of vocational education. Historians critical of vocational education have claimed that the philosophy underlying vocational education was basically conservative and designed to slot individuals into lower rungs of an educational ladder. The even more radical revisionist historians have cast early leaders in the role of conservative "social-control" advocates. Vocational education has been unable to react to criticism within a philosophic framework or present alternative evidence which demonstrates adherence to a historical pattern of value-related standards. While criticism has focused on operational as well as philosophical dimensions, more ideological criticisms have come from the educational essentialists and education perennialists. Perennialists criticize vocational education which trains students to do a "servile, task as "debasement of human nature." Essentialists advocate an educational system excluding vocational training. Reasoned argument, supported by documentation of empirical evidence, is crtical in establishing credibility for the field of vocational education. (YLB)

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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION HISTORY INTERPRETED: STATE OF THE ART, ISSUES, AND PROBLEMS

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Symposium on Historiography: The Revisionist and the Progressive Historical Interpretations of Vocational Education and Current Implications (National Convention of the American Vocational Association held at Anaheim, California - 1979)

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To begin this session, I have been asked (a) to make a few brief comments about the current status of historical interpretation in the field of vocational education, (b) to identify some of the conflicting positions regarding vocational education based on historical inquiry, and (c) to briefly highlight a few issues and problems associated with past historial research in the field.

First, it is necessary to note that the need for study and analysis of the philosophic rationale of vocational education has not been alleviated by past historical studies. For the most part, these efforts have resulted in contradictory interpretations of the social-philosophical motives underlying the early rationale of the vocational education movement. These contradictions are represented on the one hand by such contemporary vocational educators as Barlow and Goldsmith and on the other by several contemporary education historians such as Drost, Wirth, and Gadell.

Barlow has persistently argued that the historical philosophic position as developed by the early leaders is still viable for vocational education. He has consistently taken the position that the field of vocational education rests firmly on an underlying rationale - the one outlined by the early leaders such as Charles A. Prosser and David Snedden. He believes

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*NOTE: Much of the material included in this presentation was gleaned from the following source: Greenwood, K.L.B. A philosophic rationale for vocational education: Contributions of Charles A. Prosser and his contemporaries from 1900 to 1917. Doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1978.

the position of the early leaders in vocational education still serves the field adequately when he notes:

> The system of vocational education postulates that the vocational education movement rests upon a solid foundation of basic principles that do not change with time.[1]

Barlow and Goldsmith, collaborators on a project (Policy-Making for Vocational Education)[2] funded by United States Office of Education in 1975, agreed that the current philosophic dilemma has been caused by a lack of transmission of the early tenets to the present-day interpretation of vocational education. They recommended a re-examination of the philosophy of Charles A. Prosser and a reinterpretation of his position to fit the present times. They viewed the basic principles outlined by Prosser as having been verified and accepted. Goldsmith explained his position as follows:

> Let's not take it for granted that everyone knows the basic principles of vocational education upon which policy is developed. The principles - the philosophy of vocational education (as vocational educators use the term loosely) were developed during the beginning of the century; yet few vocational educators have reviewed and reinterpreted these statements in recent years....[3]

Barlow has also advanced the notion that the underlying philosophy for vocational education, as proposed and established by Prosser and Snedden, was an egalitarian philosophic position based on the liberal motives of providing more equal opportunity and freedom of choice for individuals. He suggested that freedom of occupational choice is an American ideal and, consequently, a national concern. He also noted the promoters of the Smith-Hughes Act (1917) sought to facilitate occupational choice by providing funds to the states for the promotion and development of vocational education programs. Barlow felt the commonly accepted justifications of the

early leaders for new or improved programs of vocational education were based on (a) the right of each individual to a total education, (b) the responsibility of society (through the public education system) to provide such instruction, and (c) the effect of vocational education on the economic strength of the nation.[4]

Taking an opposite view from Barlow and Goldsmith, historians who are critical of vocational education (Drost[5], Wirth[6], and Gadell[7]) have claimed that the philosophy underlying vocational education during the period 1900-1917 was basically conservative and designed to slot individuals into lower rungs of an educational ladder according to their "probable destinies". While interpreting the 1900-1917 vocational education era in relation to the function of the public schools, Perkinson was representative of this latter viewpoint. He noted that the American school had functioned as a unifying force, equalizing the children of all citizens. However, with the advent of vocational education, he believed the American school functioned less as the "great equalizer" and more as the "great selector". The new system of education permitted only the most talented to climb to the top of the educational ladder which led to the professional jobs.[8]

Markedly different from the interpretation by Barlow, and more radical than the Perkinson view, has been the recent attack on the historic purposes of vocational education by a group of revisionist historians including Lazerson and Grubb[9], Karier, Violas, and Spring[10], and Katz[11]. In their writings, early leaders such as Prosser, and especially David Snedden, are cast (along with those traditionally regarded as liberals such as John Dewey and Jane Addams) in the role of conservative "social-control" advocates.

Most of the studies which have been completed previously by either vocational educators or educational historians have not presented the early

philosophy of vocational education in an unbiased and objective way; most were not conducted with the singular purpose of examining the philosophic rationale of vocational education. The previously conducted studies which include a treatment of vocational education philosophy have done so only as a coincidental part of a broader analysis; many of these previous studies initiated by revisionist historians were attempts to justify preferential claims and positions. The studies by vocational educators have focused primarily on the presentation of factual information with very little interpretive assessment. However, Greenwood[12] has presented a critique of both "camps" with a rejection of the revisionist interpretation due to methodological errors.

* * *

Historically, vocational education has received various criticisms since the first efforts to include it as a part of the public school systems. In recent years such criticism has been continuing and growing. For the most part, the field of vocational education has been unable to effectively appraise such criticism; the field has been neither able to react within a philosophic framework nor to present alternative evidence which demonstrates adherence to a historical pattern of value-related standards.

On the other hand, some of the critics of vocational education have perceptions of the field and its role in society which can be linked to their own personal political and educational ideals. Other critics seemingly accept, or at any rate do not discuss, vocational education's present purpose or the social framework within which vocational education operates. Basically, this latter group accepts the goals that vocational education has set for itself. Their criticisms focus primarily on operational rather

than philosophical dimensions; they advocate changes that would supposedly improve efficiency, eliminate obsolete programs, introduce new practices and re-apply old principles to new situations.

An example of the kind of criticism based on philosophic premises, which vocational educators are unfamiliar with and simply cannot respond to, is illustrated by Work in America - a Report of the Special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare.[13] This report suggests that vocational education has failed to live up to its historical expectations; it further argues that career education must give up the attempt to impart specific vocational skills. Moreover, the report attempts to hold vocational education responsible for goals which are not accepted by the field. However, without knowing what their own goals have been and presently are, and the rationale for them, vocational educators are unable to adequately respond to such criticisms.

Those criticisms of vocational education which are of a more ideological nature have come, historically, from two distinct groups: the educational essentialists and the educational perennialists. Members of the latter group argue that vocational training should become entirely the function of employers while schools should devote themselves exclusively to the development of intellectual competencies by emphasizing traditional programs in liberal arts. They offer their perceptions of failures and shortcomings in vocational education programs by noting that "we learned during the war that the airplane companies could produce - in a few weeks - better airplane mechanics than the schools could produce in years." But their reason for rejecting the very concept of vocational education has been more basic. Hutchins characterizes the perennialist criticism of

vocational education as follows:

> To train a young person in school...to do some such "servile" task as cosmetology, automobile mechanics, or television repair, and this at the expense of his education amounts purely and simply to the debasement of human nature.[14]

A position representing the essentialist perspective has been proffered by Bestor[15]; he advocated the development of an educational system that does not include vocational training. The education really needed in a changing world is exemplified, he claimed, by an "essential" basic curriculum. He perceived "intellectual training" to be the only kind of education that the public school can, or should, provide. Unfortunately, an assessment of the logic supporting Bestor's views has not been initiated by vocational educators. No philosophic interaction has occurred between the field of vocational education and the essentialists about the changing nature of what is essential, or basic, in a changing, complex, industrial world which has resulted in a different clientele for the public schools than when the essentialist perspective emerged.

In a radical critique of vocational education, Grubb and Lazerson[16] identify a number of beliefs and goals which they claim are central to vocational and career education. They attempt to show how vocational and career education are mistaken in their premises and destined to fail in their objectives. A paradigm for examining or appraising the validity of such comments about the premises of vocational education has not emerged from the field of vocational education; nor have vocational educators pointed out that Grubb and Lazerson are, perhaps, advancing an argument about the organization of society rather than the implementation of vocational education. As a field, vocational education has not been able to

establish the basis on which to clarify its own premises and standards.

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The very nature of the public schools requires a constant refinement of philosophic arguments regarding the historical aims, methods and curricular content for the schools. It was necessary initially to employ such argumentation and persuasion to establish vocational education within the public schools and vocational educators must continue to engage in refining the rationale and justification for its present existence. No other public question is asked as often as "What should be taught in the public schools of America?" The dialogue is never-ending; the history of recurring reform movements in education testifies to the pliability of courses of study in the secondary schools. Owing to the nature of the American democratic society, this dialogue will continue and this means simply that reasoned argument, supported by documentation of empirical evidence, is critical in establishing credibility for the field of vocational education. To achieve such credibility, a better understanding of the historic rationale is useful in developing contemporary concepts. As a consequence, this session was proposed to provide a forum for the continuing debate of the interpretation of the historical intent of vocational education as perceived by its early leaders.

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